

AN EPIGRAPHICAL JOURNEY TO AN EASTERN ISLAMIC LAND

"Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful; He Who bestowed knowledge through the pen. He taught man that which he knew not."¹ With these verses, the divine message that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad guaranteed that Islamic culture would forever attach great importance to writing and to the written word. Thus the Muslim *umma* started on their cultural journey imbued with respect for the pen and for penmanship and with calligraphic zeal. The importance of writing is also apparent in secular literature. Arabic love poetry, for instance, uses the forms of letters in its romantic and ornamented narration as comparisons to suggest the bodily features of the beloved:

I saw you in my dreams embracing me
As the *lām* of the scribe embraces the *alif*.²

Similes of this variety can be traced back even to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The famous early Arab poet Labid describes the scene of a torrential stream in the desert: "Gushing brooks all of a sudden reveal the traces of habitation/like old books whose faded texts have been illuminated by pens."³

The written word has a sacred place in Islamic culture because the words of the Qur'an conveyed the divine message, and the written form of the Qur'an was considered to be the ultimate religious expression, the visual analogue for the divine message.⁴ It was in written form that the holy scriptures were preserved through the ages. Arabic script was endowed with transcendent power because it was the vehicle that carried God's word; it therefore became the symbol of Islamic belief and authority. Islamic culture employed the written word, not the image, as the herald of its faith. Its writing was formed into a unique combination of the verbal and the visual.⁵ That good writing is further enhanced by aesthetic values was the assumption that prompted Muslims to create writing with great visual appeal. The saying of the Prophet Muhammad that Allah, being beautiful Himself, loves beauty,⁶ underscores the importance Islam attaches to aesthetic per-

ception by human beings. Beautification was all that much more important when the sacred act of writing was performed.

The importance of calligraphy in Islamic culture can also be judged by the high status of calligraphers in Muslim society. From very early in Islam the calligrapher occupied a prestigious position. In Muhammad's own lifetime, those responsible for writing divine revelation (*waḥy*), the *kātib al-waḥy*, were given special status. In the later stages as well the calligraphers continued to enjoy esteem in the royal courts. The function of calligraphy in fact was not merely an art to be practiced by one particular class of artists; its scope was so broad that it even touched other spheres of knowledge. Nizam al-Mulk, in his famous treatise on administration, *Naṣāḥat al-Mulūk*, or *The Counsel for Kings*, pays special attention to calligraphy, as its acquisition would exalt the majestic qualities of the king. To him there is nothing so fine as the pen.⁷ In fact, calligraphy in the course of time became one of the most cherished skills in the royal houses of the Muslim world, and many kings and princes not only learned this art, but also excelled in it. In India, for instance, Sultan Mahmud is said to have copied the Qur'an in his leisure time.⁸ The Islamic literary heritage is full of materials on calligraphy, on the lives and works of calligraphers, and in praise of the pen and penmanship. While the architects of many famous buildings in the Muslim world remain unknown, the calligraphers of many architectural inscriptions can be identified, either through literary sources or by their signatures on the inscriptions themselves.

That writing is one of the most useful and effective arts of cultural expression was of course realized even in ancient civilizations. The three most important of them, those of the Indus, Mesopotamia, and the Nile, developed their own writing systems, specimens of which still exist in inscriptions on stone, metal plaques, and baked clay. Bengal, which lies in the eastern part of the South Asian subcontinent, also has a rich epigraphical heritage which goes back centuries. Its pre-Islamic archaeological findings show that Bengal had a very rich

tradition of stone carving and sculptures which were inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which encourage religious imagery. It is surprising, however, that in spite of this superb stone-carving tradition, the artists and craftsmen did not in general use their skill for decorative mural writing during this period. The inscriptions of pre-Islamic Bengal are informative rather than calligraphic in intent (fig. 1).³

All that changed significantly in the region after the advent of Islam in the early thirteenth century. Representation and sculpture, though they evolved in other nations as power symbols often associated with divine power, could not acquire any such significance or appreciation in Islamic culture, whose religious mission was so firmly aniconic. Instead, the Muslims explored other media to express their artistic zeal, and it was in calligraphy that they found one of the best means to serve this purpose. It eventually turned into the central Muslim visual form.

It is not surprising then that Arabic script and calligraphy also found a new role in Bengal after the Muslim conquest in 1205. The artists of Muslim Bengal diverted their traditional stone-carving skill to produce some wonderful specimens of calligraphy on stone, quite a number of which have survived to this day. Epigraphy begins almost immediately, as the conquering Muslims began to build and to inscribe their buildings. It is difficult to imagine a building's being erected in that period that would not have had some kind of inscription on it; it was as if they thought it would have looked naked or unfinished without one. As a result, epigraphical records and inscriptions are plentiful and rich in

both artistic accomplishment and historical information.

Although a great number of inscriptions have perished with the passage of time, a large number have also survived. They offer a vast and virgin field of investigation and research in the history of the region. Their study was not even begun until the first years of the last century, when some local scholars and British Orientalists and antique collectors started to take an interest in them. One of the pioneers in the field was Sayed Ghulam Husein (d. 1817) who lived near Gaur, the ruined early Muslim capital of Bengal which abounded in inscriptions and other archaeological treasures. While compiling his history of Bengal (*Riṣāṭ al-Salāfin*, published in Calcutta in 1898), he studied the epigraphical materials of Gaur and used them in constructing the chronology of Bengal's ruling dynasties. Munshi Ilahi Bakhsh, another local scholar who wrote a history of Bengal a few years later (*Khairshid-i Jahān Numā*, published in the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1895 with an English translation by H. Beveridge), also made use of them.

Among the British scholars pioneering in this field, the first who comes to mind is Sir Henry Creighton who lived for the last twenty years of his life, between 1786 and 1807, near Gaur and wrote a book called *The Ruins of Gaur* which was published in London in 1817, illustrated with fabulous sketches and drawings. In it he often refers to inscriptions he found there.

This was a time when interest in Oriental antiquities and art objects was growing in the West, and many Europeans were visiting ancient sites in search of them.

श्रीक १२०६
 ना.क्र.तुरंग युग्मे वै मधुमास चोषादे शै
 कामरूपे। स। मा। ग। त। वा। वरेक्षसयमाययु

1. A Sanskrit inscription dated Saka 1127 (1206) on a rock in Kamrup about two miles northeast of Gauhati city on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river in Assam. It commemorates the drowning in the river of invading Turkish troops under the command of Bakhtiyar Khilji on their return from an abortive campaign in Tibet. The text runs as follows: Śak 1127/Śāke turanga yugmeṣe. Madhumaśe troyodāśe./Kamarupa samagatya. Turusika kshayamayau. ("In Saka 1127, on the thirteenth of the month of honey [i.e., the month of Chaitra]/upon arriving in Kamrupa, the Turks perished.")

Cities such as Gaur and Pandua in Bengal attracted these men, many of whom were little more than plunderers. Some, however, left eloquent accounts and lucid diaries of their experiences which provide marvelous source materials for inscriptions that are no longer extant. Most of them are now preserved in the India Office Library in London.

Among these British collectors of Oriental antiquities the most celebrated was Major William Franklin who visited Gaur at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His diaries, which he entitled "Journal of a Route from Rajmahal to Gaur" and "The Ruins of Gaur," both preserved in the India Office Library (MS nos. 19 and 284) provide us with a clear description of the archaeological remains in the region. He also records a number of inscriptions in them. The collection that he took with him to England consisted of many monumental inscriptions, some of which he gave to the British Museum. The most elegant piece in his collection, however, found its way through antique dealers to the United States, and is now preserved in the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia.

Major Franklin was accompanied on his tour by a local guide named Munshi Shayam Prasad, a scholar of Arabic and Persian. At Franklin's request he prepared a report on the archaeological remains of the area, and it too has become a valuable source for the epigraphy of the region (MS. 2841 in the India Office Library). Another contemporary amateur archaeologist was a man named Orme who also left a small report, *The Ruins of Gaur*, now also in the India Office Library (MS 65: 25) which provides descriptions of a few inscriptions.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the investigation of the art and archaeology of the region became more scholarly. Among the comprehensive studies turned out at that time is *Gaur, Its Ruins and Inscriptions* by J. H. Ravenshaw, published in London in 1878, which is particularly rich in illustrations and texts. The formation of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1862 brought a revolutionary change in archaeological study there. Its first director general, Sir Alexander Cunningham, and later on his colleagues as well, took systematic steps toward recording all the existing inscriptions. Many of the rubbings they collected were sent to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, where scholars like Henry Blochmann deciphered and published them.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Archaeological Survey of India established a separate section for epigraphy and began to publish its specialized series,

Epigraphia Indica. At the turn of the century, the even more specialized *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica*, devoted entirely to the Muslim inscriptions of India, issued its first volume in 1907-8. After independence from British rule, its name was changed to *Epigraphia Indica, Arabic and Persian Supplement*. In it are published quite a number of inscriptions from Bengal, although many more have yet to be deciphered and studied.

Inscriptions form indispensable primary source materials because they are not often subject to forgery. They also provide valuable information for art history in their often richly decorated backgrounds and borders (fig. 2), and an authentic record for developments in palaeography and calligraphy. Sometimes they constitute the single most important decorative element on a building.¹⁰ Even in Islamic miniature painting, buildings are often shown decorated with inscriptional panels. The epigraphy of the Muslim world is not, of course, limited solely in function to architectural decoration; it also has a broad range of visual, spiritual, and social themes.

The horizontal inscriptional band of the *kiswa* and *tiraz* writing both left their mark on architectural inscriptions in Bengal, just as they did elsewhere in the Muslim world. Most are executed horizontally and in bold characters. In the Islamic world generally these inscriptions are found in varieties of materials using tile, stucco, baked brick, or stone slab, but the ones in Bengal are always carved in relief on stone, usually black basalt or granite, giving them a monumental effect.

Calligraphic and stylistic variations are tied to the message contained in the inscription, since particular styles and scripts came to be regarded as more effective for one or another purpose. Arabic calligraphy went through a series of alterations and experimentation throughout its history which brought a flood of new scripts and a proliferation of names for each variation; often a new name was given to a script that shows only the most minute differences from others. A vertical slant, an extended horizontal stroke, or the size of a letter was often sufficient to distinguish a particular script from the rest.¹¹

Of the two main lines of Islamic calligraphy — the cursive and the angular or *Kufic* — the latter, which bore a striking resemblance to archaic Arabic script, dominated in the early period of Islam. Although it cannot have been an easy medium of communication, since it is difficult to both read and write, it was wonderfully suited to inscriptional panels on architecture, to mural calligraphy, and to *tiraz* writing. In the Shi'ite regions — Fatimid Egypt, Qaramatian Bahrain, and



2. An undated Persian inscription in Bihari style from the Sultanate period. The text reads, *Aman āman būd az āfathā-yi charḡhi* ("May it remain safe and sound from the calamities of the ages, O God!"). Now in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh

the eastern Arabian peninsula — complicated and mysterious Kufic styles (plaited, foliated, and floriated Kufic) flourished, often rendering the texts ambiguous and difficult to read. This new development may to some extent have been inspired by the mystic nature of Shi'ism in the early Islamic period, especially to its belief that a hierarchy of knowledge and spiritual development should be assigned to various classes of people. The abstract pattern of Kufic writing was inaccessible to the common people, but the learned men, the imams and religious scholars, were trained to read them and perceive their hidden meanings. The common people had to be satisfied with the baraka that came from the mere sight of them.¹²

Although Kufic became dominant, the cursive style never died out completely, for it was always in daily use for practical purposes that required swift writing.¹³ Beginning in the late twelfth century it began to gain ground against Kufic for decorative purposes as well, and this coincided with an overall decline in Shi'ī polit-

ical influence. It was just at this time that Bengal came under Muslim rule. Bakhtiar Khilji, an adventurer from a Turkish Afghan tribe, conquered Bengal with a handful of soldiers in 1205, and the conquerors brought with them cursive styles such as naskh and thuluth. Kufic never gained ground there: the only Kufic known in the epigraphy of Bengal is on the Adina (a Persian word for *jāmi'*) Masjid in Pandua, which once served as its capital (fig. 3). It is undated, and contains the basmala and Sūrat al-Fāṭiḥa in Kufic and verses 28 and 19 of the Sūrat al-Tawba in thuluth in a single panel. The thuluth writing in bold characters dominates the greater part of the panel; the Kufic is used to form a thin decorative band on the upper level. Combining two different calligraphic styles in a single inscription — especially thuluth with a Kufic border — was a popular practice in that period in many parts of the Muslim world, including Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt.¹⁴ Some beautiful examples of these combinations can be seen at the Gur-i Mir complex in Samar-



3 Adina Mosque, Pandua. Inscription on mihrab executed sometime around the year 1375. The only known kufic inscription in Bengal. The upper band contains the basmala and the Sura al-Fatiha (sura 1). Below in a thin panel of bold thuluth are vv. 18 and 19 of the Sura al-Tauha

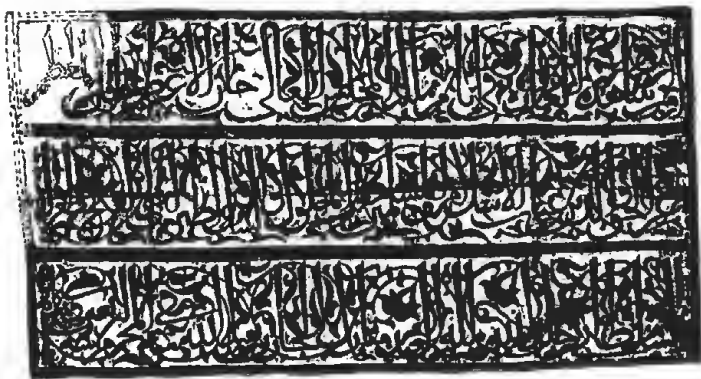
qand and at the Masjid-i Mir at Mashhad in Iran.

Thuluth was from the very beginning the most popular style for inscriptions in Bengal. It is beautifully represented in one of the earliest Islamic inscriptions of the region, dated Muharram 640 (July 1241). The inscription was discovered in Bari-Dargah in Bihar province, India, which at the time constituted the north-western region of the Bengal administration. The writing is well executed in bold character on a foliated ground, on a black basalt slab measuring 50 by 26 inches (fig. 4). A striking feature is the use of elongated vertical strokes, a style that soon became a very popular feature, especially in pre-Mughal inscriptions. The motif can also be seen in the inscriptional program of the Qutub Minar at Delhi and in contemporary Mamluk inscriptions in Egypt. Sometimes the verticals in thuluth, especially the *alif*, are further stylized by flourishing their upper ends downward in a slant to form a noose-like ligature. This effect is produced by tilting the reed pen or *qalam* when it touches the paper or other surface for the first time and then lifting it slightly upward before making the down stroke that creates the vertical. In Islamic calligraphy this particular stylistic feature is known as a *zulf* (sometimes also *zalat* or *zulfā*), the curved body in the middle is called *badan*, and the lower sharp end is the *sayf* (fig. 5, shape A). Thuluth works best for inscriptional calligraphy in its *jali* (bold character) form. An example can be seen in a small tablet (originally a tombstone), now preserved in the

Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka (fig. 6), though there it comes close to the style known as *muhaqqaq*, a less-well-known variety used mainly for Qur'anic calligraphy.

Naskh is probably the most widely used all-purpose calligraphic style in the Muslim world, and in Bengal, too, a large number of inscriptions are rendered in that style, though there the difference between naskh and thuluth is so marginal that it is often difficult for the uninitiated to distinguish them. Essentially the distinction lies in the slanting in the vertical and horizontal strokes. However, often the slanting in the thuluth is not prominent (fig. 7), and there are quite a number of Bengali inscriptions where the task of determining which is used is difficult, both because they do not follow conventional styles and because they accommodate characteristics from more than one style (figs. 8, 9).

The term naskh used to be applied to a range of related cursives. Many of these minor styles flourished in a particular region and were given regional names — Mamluki naskh and Iranian naskh, for example. The same style could also be found under different names in different places. Tawqi⁶, for instance, was also known as Old Iranian naskh in Iran.¹⁵ Tawqi⁶ is rather uncommon and in medieval times was used mainly for colophons. Some of the recently discovered Haram documents from the Aqsa mosque¹⁶ are written in it, suggesting that it was also used for business documents and legal deeds in the Mamluk period, probably because it



4. Inscription over the gate at Bari Dargah in monumental thuluth; the third oldest known Islamic inscription in Bengal, it is dated Muharram 640 (July 1242). The upper left corner of the slab is broken. The text reads: "This building was erected during the reign of the exalted court (*al-majlis al-ʿāli*), the great Khan, the exalted Khaqan, the glory of the truth and faith, the succorer of Islam and the Muslims, the helper of kings and monarchs, Abu al-Fath Tughril al-Sultani, may Allah perpetuate his empire. [It was made by] the servant Mubarak the treasurer: may Allah accept from him [his deeds] in Muharram in the year 640 [July 1242]."



5. (left) An undated thuluth inscription in a Mughal mosque in the old quarter of Dhaka. It is a typical example of religious epigraphy in the mosques of the Islamic world. The top line contains the basmalla and tahlil; the rest is verse 18 of the Sura al-Tauba (sura 9), still a popular choice for mosque inscriptions today. (right) Shape A

zulf

A

badan

sayf

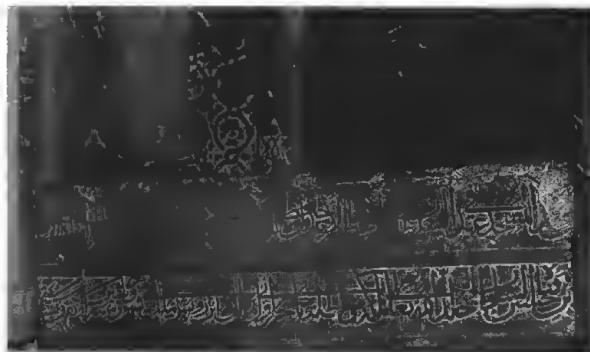


6. An undated inscription showing the *jālī* (boldface) form particularly well suited to building inscriptions. It reads: *in gahr-i Malik Mansūr, sharāb dār ghāyṛ mahallī, dust-i Rukkhān* ("This is the tomb of Malik Mansur, the non-resident cupbearer [and] friend to Rukhkan"). Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

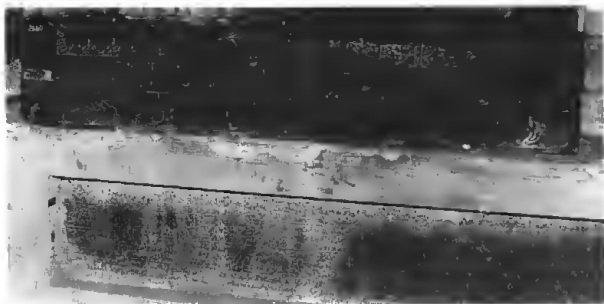
was very intricate and therefore less subject than others to forgery.

The word *tawqīʿ* means signature, and no doubt came to refer to this script because its intricate lettering looks like a signature. In Bengal it turns up in a few inscriptions. On one, dated 722 (1322), now in the Varendra Research Museum at Rajshahi in Bangla-

desh (fig. 10), endings of all the letters and words are joined to form an unbroken chain of writing in each line, a feature known in Arabic calligraphy as *musalsal*.¹⁷ This particular inscription also has no vocalization or diacritical marks, making its deciphering a bit difficult. The inscription is important historically as well, since it is the only inscription from the reign of Sultan Bahadur



7. A thuluth inscription referring to Mahmud Shah as sultan in the year 934 (1528) (for text, see Appendix). Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

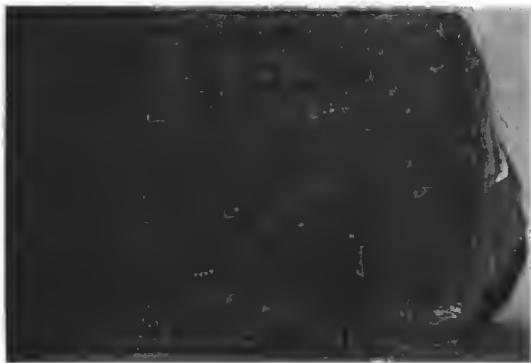


8. An undated inscription from the reign of Shah Jahan in a nontraditional style (for text, see Appendix). Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

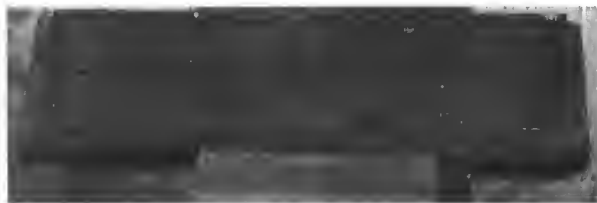
Shah, about whom very little is known from other sources. At the same time it is the only inscription which belongs to a building that functioned as a government treasury.

Another rare script is *riqa'* which resembles *tawqī'*, except that it is less bold and has slant lines similar to *thuluth*. Its horizontal loops and ligatures are often

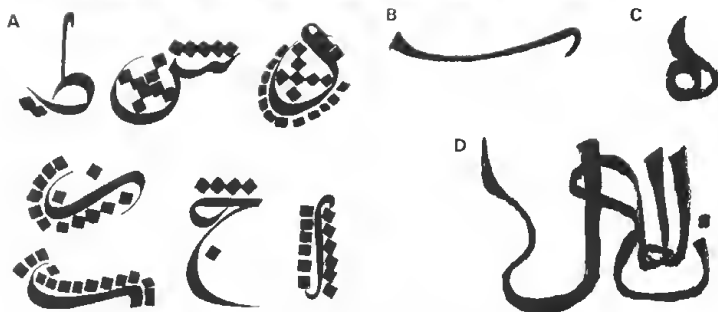
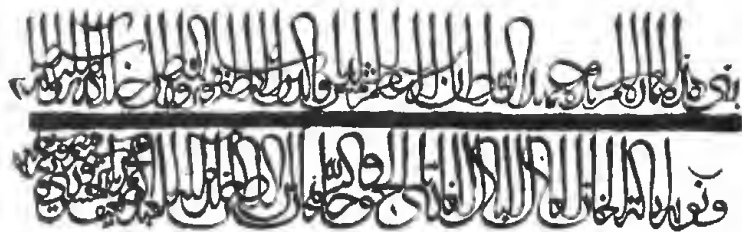
elongated as they are in *rayhani* style (fig. 11, shape A). Some characteristics of *riqa'* can be seen in the first Islamic inscription in Bengal, dated 618 (1221),¹⁰ but it is best represented in inscriptions dated 707 (1307) and 715 (1315) (figs. 11–12). Both of these inscriptions are fascinating, not only in the intricate patterns of their calligraphic program, but also in their skillful execution



9. An undated inscription in an unusual style (for text, see Appendix). Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



10. An inscription from the time of Sulian Bahadur Shah in lawq' style, dated 722 (1322) (for text, see Appendix). Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



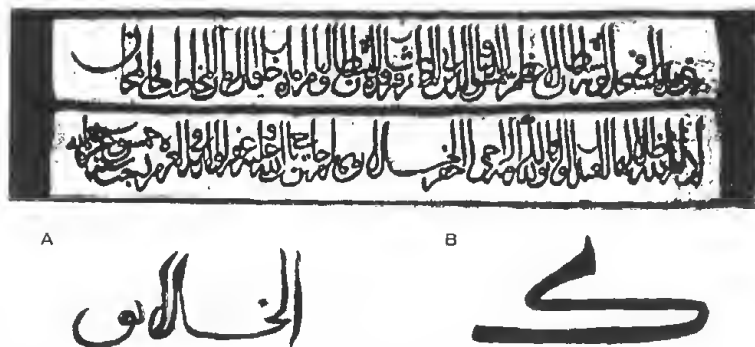
11. An inscription from Ghori Dargah, Bihar Sharif, dated 707 (1307) in nqa' style. The text reads: "This additional building was constructed during the reign of the great sultan, the sun of the world and the faith, the victorious Firuz Shah the sultan; may God perpetuate his kingdom and his sovereignty. [And] during the succession of the regency of the khan, the just, the benevolent, the conqueror, the crown of the truth and the faith, Hatem Khan son of the sultan; may God perpetuate his kingdom. The humble servant Muhammad Hasan Bikanipuri; in the month of the year 707 [1307]." Indian Museum, Calcutta

on stone slabs in relief, which elicits both surprise and admiration from the viewer. In the first inscription (fig. 11), for instance, the endings of all the words are joined to others to create the effect of a *musalsal*, or chain of continuity. Some of the horizontal strokes are deliberately elongated so as to create the impression of waves in the flow of the writing. The initial form of the *sīn* in the word *sulṭānulu* at the end of the first line is a good example of this (fig. 11, shape B). The *hāʾ* of the word *hādihī* (the second word on the first line) looks rather like the face of a curious kitten peeping through the clusters of letters (fig. 11, shape C), and in fact, this version of the *hāʾ* is better known in Arabic as *waḡh al-hirr*, or cat's face. Many other ornamental terms in Arabic calligraphy are similarly named after the features of living beings. The peculiar joining of the *dāl* with the preceding *alif* and *nūn* in the word *al-ʿādil* in the second line is also interesting, for there too the artist has shown considerable imagination (fig. 11, shape D).

The second inscription has a somewhat different calligraphic program, and its letters are more thickly arranged. Nevertheless there too the calligrapher let his imagination range quite freely. One of his innovations is the word *al-khalayiq* in the middle of the second line, where the middle form of *khaʾ* is unusually stretched out

and joined to a rather peculiar looking *lām-alif* (fig. 12, shape A). Another striking element is the small crown-like top (fig. 12, shape B) which is mounted on the vertical stroke of the letter *kāf* in the word *li-karamihī* (middle of the second line). This particular horizontal part of the *kāf*, which is known in Arabic as *shakila*, appears quite frequently in this crown-like form in the inscriptions of Bengal and often is helpful in distinguishing the vertical of the *kāf* in the cluster of other verticals in the intricate calligraphic program of the inscriptions.

All these styles originated outside the South Asian subcontinent. The Bihari style, however, evolved mainly in that region and scarcely found its way outside it as an independent calligraphic style.¹² It was used in the pre-Mughal period, mainly for copying the Qurʾān. In Bengal, however, it was also used for some architectural inscriptions. In it the horizontal loops are much longer than the vertical strokes. These dominating horizontal loops often begin from a very thin point, then gradually grow thicker as they move left, finally terminating in a sharp point or blunt edge (fig. 13, shape A). A Sultanganj inscription dated 835 (1532), now in the Varendra Research Museum at Rajshahi, is a perfect example of this style (fig. 13). Another undated Persian



12. An inscription in *riqāʿ* style from the Hatim Khan palace in Bihar Sharif, dated 715 (1315). The text reads: "This mosque was built at the succession of the great sultan, the sun of the world and the faith, the victorious Piroz Shah the sultan and in the administration of the overlord (*shahpan*) of the age known as Hatim Khan. May God perpetuate their shadows; [by] the servants [who is] trusting in God alone and softening his magnanimity, [bring] the lowest of the creatures Bahram son of Haji, may God accept his repentance and forgive his parents; on the first of Rajab in the year 715 [October 1, 1315]." Indian Museum, Calcutta.



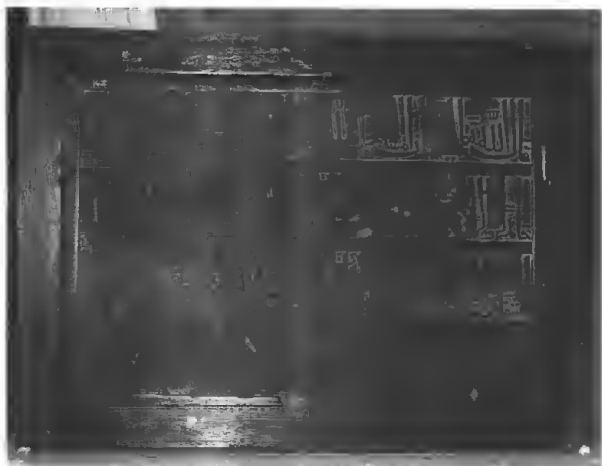
13. The Subhanganj inscription in Bihari style, dated 835 (1432) (for text, see Appendix). Now in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

inscription in the same museum is also inscribed in the Bihari style (fig. 2). Among the remarkable features of this inscription are the different geometric and vegetal designs in relief which thickly cover the entire background. The most prominent among them is the lotus which crowns a long stem placed on a half-wheel-like shape (fig. 2, shape A). Lotuses are abundant in the lakes and ponds of the Bengal countryside and are venerated in both Hindu and Buddhist cosmology as a symbol of the source of life and purity. The lotus was therefore a popular decorative motif in this region, and is often found in stone façades of the local temple architecture. In fact this may serve as an interesting example of how easily the local motifs were assimilated into decorating Islamic buildings in the region. Another local decorative element in this fragmented stone arch is its polylobed design, which was also quite popular in the architecture of this region.

Next to the lotus flower on the right corner of the inscription we find an arch-like design which appears to be resting on two extravagantly decorated stone pillars, while a chandelier-like hanging design decorated with floral motifs and a parallel chain of jewels is suspended in the center (fig. 2, shape B). An additional flowery

exuberance in and around the calligraphic background and various other obscure and abstract motifs decorate the rest of the surface of the stone slab. This broken black basalt stone slab, measuring 15 by 24 inches, probably formed part of a polylobed arch of a niche or window in a religious building. It seems that the Bihari style of calligraphy it uses remained popular in this region for a significant part of the Sultanate period. The Mandra inscription of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah, dated 830 (1427), now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, suggests that the style was used all over the country (fig. 14). The last two lines of this inscription, though completed on the epigraphic program, were never finished by the stonecutter. In addition, the letters are squeezed one above the other for lack of space, a common phenomenon in the final passage of a calligraphic program where the *dair* is recorded, either because sufficient space was not allocated for the last part of the design or because something was added to the epigraphical program after work had begun.

One of the most striking calligraphic features of pre-Mughal Bengal is the application of some of the decorative elements of *tughra* in the monumental inscrip-



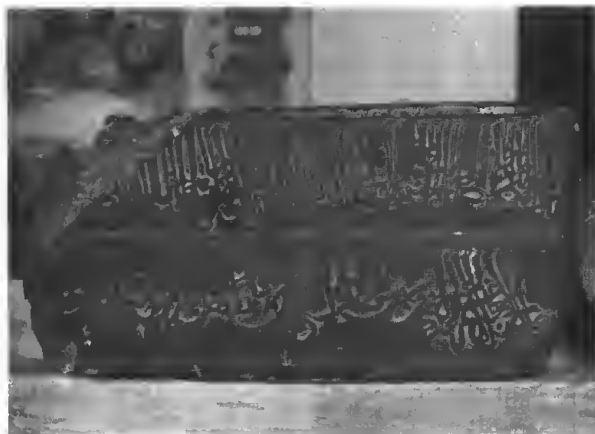
11. A Sultanaite inscription from Dhaka dated 830 (1427) in bilhari style (for text, see Appendix). Now in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

tions of the region. Tughra is mainly known through the imperial examples of beautiful monograms and signatures from the sultans of the Ottoman empire, and was well developed as early as the reign of Mehmet the Conqueror.²⁰ However, Bengali tughra more closely resembles versions from Mamluk Egypt, examples of which are shown by Qalqashandi in his book, *subh al-ashā*.²¹ Though it refers to a decorative feature, the word *tughra* is quite often used by local scholars in Bengal as an independent calligraphic variety. Its main characteristic is the elongation of the vertical shafts of letters in symmetrical order, a practice that calligraphers in Bengal found very appealing.²² The monumental effect of these vertical shafts is often so powerful that it overshadows the horizontals which cluster at the bottom of the text and usually contain more letters (fig. 15).

The calligraphers of Bengal were aware of the unlimited scope and freedom Arabic script could provide, and they used their imagination and ideas freely to create new designs and forms in tughra. Among its ornamental varieties is quite often found a feature whereby

the upper ends of the verticals are twisted to form a noose or spearhead-like shape. The round letters such as *nūn*, *qāf*, and *yā'* are further twisted to create the forms of a ringlet or crescent and placed on the upper edge of the verticals (fig. 16). From the combination an overall image of boat and oar, bow and arrow, and similar images can be obtained. In some inscriptions, the Arabic preposition *fī* is enlarged and placed on top of comb-like verticals to produce a bird-like image such as a swan or pelican (fig. 17).

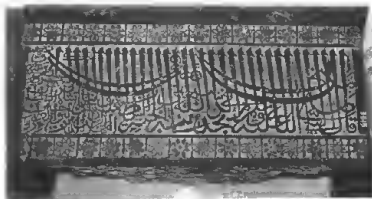
Tughra was an abstract form of calligraphy that had its roots in the social and religious sentiments of Bengali Muslim society and culture. It was a kind of metaphorical expression of the nature and environment of Bengal which the artist tried to depict in his calligraphic art. We may be justified in interpreting the various calligraphic forms of tughra in the Bengali inscriptions as abstract representations of rivers, boats and oars, pelicans or swans, bows and arrows, lines of marching soldiers, and lines of Muslims at prayer. Some of these choices were obviously inspired by the picturesque landscape of the Bengali delta.



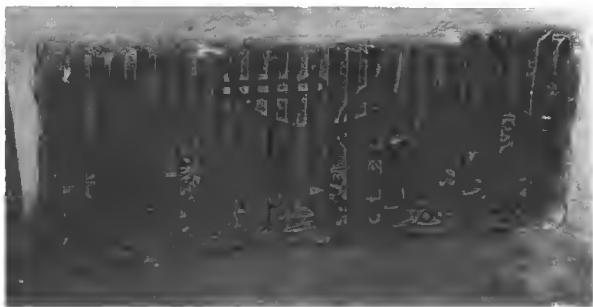
15. An Arabic inscription from the time of Sultan Ala'uddin Husain Shah in Bengali tughra style, dated 912 (1507) Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Calligraphic expression is often influenced by the social, religious, and spiritual message of the setting for which it is intended. The inscription on the tombstone of Noor Qutb al-'Alam in Hazrat Pandua in west Bengal, dated 863 (1459; fig. 18), for example, is on a plain and simple background and is devoid of any over-

whelming decoration because it belongs to funerary architecture. The elongated vertical shafts, arrayed in symmetrical order, start at the bottom in a thin line that grows thicker as it ascends. The unusual elevation of the verticals upward and their arrangement in a row can be interpreted as representing departed souls set-



16. An Arabic inscription from the reign of Sultan Husain Shah of Bengal, dated 907 (1501) in typical Bengali tughra style. The text reads: "The Prophet, peace and the blessings of God be upon him, said, 'For whoever builds a mosque on earth, God will build seventy palaces in paradise. The sultan of the period and the age, the highness of the world and the faith, the victorious Husain Shah the sultan built [it] in the year 907 [1501].'" Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



17. An undated religious inscription in tughra style. The text contains Qur'an 73: 6-9. Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

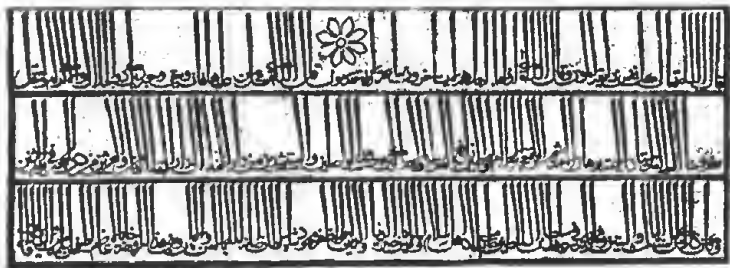
ting forth on their journey upward or descending angels with blessings for the participants in the funerary prayers as well as for the deceased soul. The clustered letters at the bottom may be interpreted as symbols of a congregation lined up for the funeral prayer. An eight-lobed flower in the middle of the upper part of the first line symbolizes the eight heavens, an appropriate motif in this setting, since it coincides with the position of the deceased in the arrangement for prayer when the body is placed in front of the funeral congregation.

The tradition of decorative writing with tughra motifs remained popular for quite a long time during the independent Sultanate, especially for architectural inscriptions. With the advent of the Mughals, however, the cultural development assumed a new dimension under a more centralized administration. The Mughals were greatly influenced by Iranian culture, and invited many Persian artists and calligraphers to the royal court. As a result, nasta'liq, Persia's new and popular calligraphic style, found its way into India (fig. 19) and soon emerged as the dominant style of the whole region. In Bengal, too, architectural calligraphy was influenced by this new development, and most of the inscriptions of the period were inscribed in nasta'liq. Bengal suffered a setback in the Mughal period (fig. 20), however, in spite of the refined taste in calligraphy displayed at the Mughal court at Delhi. One of the reasons was that imperial patronage favored manuscripts over architectural calligraphy and thus diverted talent in that direction. The other was that Bengal fell in status from center to province when the Mughals chose Delhi as their

capital, losing the glory and importance it had enjoyed under the independent Sultanate. For those reasons, most of the Mughal inscriptions are informative rather than calligraphic.

Though the early Mughal inscriptions in Bengal tend to be in a crude form of naskh (figs. 21, 22, 23), most of the later Mughal inscriptions of Bengal are executed in nasta'liq and easy to decipher. All three of the earliest Mughal inscriptions (figs. 21-23) which date from Akbar's campaign in Bengal witness how political turmoil and instability affect artistic continuity and development. Later Mughal inscriptions from a more stable time show better taste and greater refinement. In the Bangladesh National Museum at Dhaka are a beautiful inscription in nasta'liq on a milestone which is dated 1102 (1690; fig. 24) and a thuluth inscription dated 1116 (1703; fig. 25), both of which display very accurate measurement and proportion in their lettering.

The beauty of Islamic inscriptions was not, however, limited to their visual impact; their content was also meant to be a source of inspiration. Naturally the architecture on which the inscription appeared affected the choice of text, or, to put it another way, the selection of a particular text was made on the basis of the function of the architecture. The selection of an appropriate place for the inscription on a monument was also important, since those parts of the monuments which were most easily seen best served the purpose. The theme of sovereignty is historically associated with monumental entranceways, for example, because they were thought to be proper places to proclaim the sovereign's power. The



18 Tombstone at shrine of Noor Qutb al-'Alam in Pandua, dated 836 (1459), a peculiar synthesis of Bihari and tughra style (for text, see Appendix).



19 A nasta'liq inscription on marble from the time of Jahangir dated 1207 (1618) (for text, see Appendix), Ahmadabad, Gujarat, now in the British Museum, London



20. A locally designed inscription in crude naskh from Durgapur village in Jaipurhat District, dated 1086 (1675) (for text, see Appendix) Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

inscription on a mosque entrance was apt to contain verses about the glory and praise of Allah (fig. 14). Quite often it also contained those Qur'anic verses or Prophet's sayings which promise Divine reward for those who construct mosques and maintain them in use (figs. 5, 26). Inscriptions on mihrabs often use a verse in which the word *mihrab* appears. The calligrapher also finds a great source of inspiration both spiritually and aesthetically in inscribing on religious buildings *al-asma' al-husnā*, or the beautiful divine attributes, the basmala, the Throne verse, and sometimes even poetic verses (usually in Persian) conveying some spiritual theme (figs. 8, 22).

Though in this short epigraphical survey our scope has been somewhat limited, given the vast dimensions of the epigraphical world, we will not be doing it justice if we do not attend to its enormous value as a historical source. These Bengali examples, like all inscriptions, yield a wide range of historical information. Since the majority of them commemorate the construction of buildings they also provide help in dating and identifying buildings and their functions.

Figure 7 shows a recently discovered inscription from the district of Pabna in Bangladesh dated 934 (1528) which records Mahmud Shah as sultan. This contra-

dicts the known historical accounts, according to which Mahmud did not seize power until 1533, after his nephew Sultan Firoz Shah, who ruled Bengal only for a brief time in 1532–33, was assassinated, probably by Mahmud Shah himself. In 1528, the date of the inscription, however, Mahmud's elder brother Nusrat Shah, the father of Firoz Shah, was the sultan; he ruled Bengal between 1519 and 1532, and was a very powerful sultan whose forces even faced the Mughal army under Babur in upper Bihar. (Thus far twenty-two inscriptions from his reign have been discovered, including one in the present district of Dinajpur dated 934 [1528].) It seems likely that Mahmud rebelled against his brother in that year and declared himself sultan in the present Pabna district, but that the rebellion was then put down. He did not give up, however, and kept on plotting until he succeeded in seizing power in 1533. In Bengal in some instances a ruler would allow his eldest son and heir apparent to use the title sultan, but never his brothers or other relatives. The most likely explanation for this inscription therefore is that there was a hitherto unknown premature and unsuccessful rebellion by the man who would later become the last independent sultan of Bengal.

Another useful characteristic of these inscriptions



21. Nayabari bilingual (Arabic and Persian) inscription from ca. 1690 in crude naskh (for text, see Appendix). Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.



22. A mosque inscription in crude naskh dated 1000 (1591), from the village of Burarchar in the Comilla District. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.



23. Another mosque inscription in crude naskh dated 1000 (1591) from the village of Dohar in Dhaka. Bangladeshi National Museum, Dhaka.



24. A milestone dated 1102 (1690) in nasta'liq from Chapatali village in Narayanganj District (for text, see Appendix). Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

grows from the custom of listing varieties of titles for a ruler, which occasionally can occupy a large portion of what can be a very limited available space for the text. In an inscription (fig. 4) dated 640 (1242), Tughril, governor of Bengal, assumes eight titles, a modest number compared to the forty-six royal titles of Husain

Shah. Although most of these titles refer to royal qualities, nobility, and power, some, such as *nāṣir 'ibād Allāh* (helper of the slaves of Allah, fig. 7), and *asād al-Islām wa-al-Muslimīn* (lion of Islam and the Muslims, fig. 10), *jalāl al-dunyā wa-al-dīn* (glory of earth and religion, fig. 13), have obvious religious significance. A much rarer



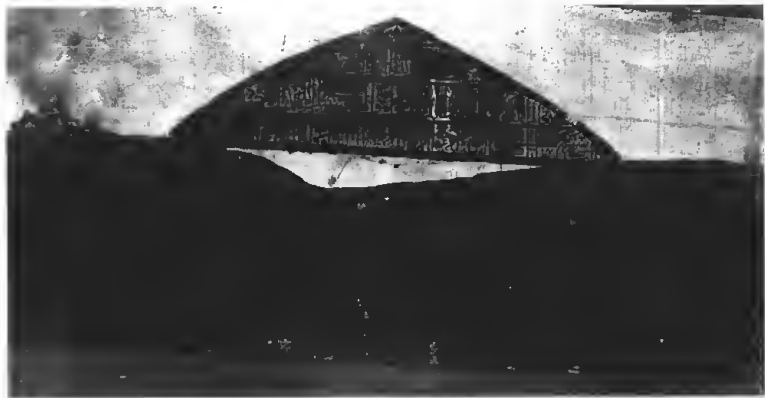
25. A religious inscription in jali thuluth, dated 1116 (1707). The first line of the inscription is the basmala, the second line the takhlit and the third line records the date, Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

title is *kāshif asrār al-Qurʾān* (the revealer of the mystical secrets of the Qurʾān) which appears as an attribute of Sultan Fath Shah in an inscription dated 889 (1484). Its use suggests that he was, or at least wanted his subjects to think he was, a keen Qurʾānic scholar and thus their spiritual leader.

The titles of the governors, administrative officers, and even the local feudal lords are no less grand. Firoz Eitgin, who held a small fief on the northwestern frontier of Bengal, assumed the title, *khān-i khānān al-sharq wa-al-ṣin* (khan of all the khans of the East and China), which appears in an inscription dated 697 (1297) in the district of Mongyr in the present state of Bihar. This title reflects the ambition of the Muslim rulers of Bengal to extend their frontier further toward the east, especially into Tibet, a goal they never managed to fulfill. Bakhtiar Khilji, the first Muslim conqueror of Bengal, for example, set out on a campaign against Tibet almost immediately after his conquest of Bengal, but met with disaster in battle and had to retreat with great losses (fig. 1).

Though there were a number of titles popular among all the sultans, such as *abū al-muẓaffar* (the victorious), there are others that are associated only with particular sultans, who often then become known by those titles rather than their given names. The undated inscription in fig. 8 records only royal titles, *ʿAlāʾ al-dīn wa dunyā Shah Jahān*. It can be ascribed either to the fifth Mughal emperor, known by his title Shah Jahan — though never to my knowledge as *ʿAlāʾ al-dīn wa-al-dunyā* — or to Sultan Husain Shah of Bengal (fig. 16), known by his title *ʿAlāʾ al-dīn* though he is not known to have used the title *Shah Jahān*. Since the inscription is in a poetic Persian typical of the Mughals, it is more likely the former.

Among the data that can be extracted from this set of inscriptions is the title used by the cupbearer — who was also the royal taster and a very important personage — at the royal court of Bengal. The title, *sharāb dār ghayr mahallī* (cupbearer outside the palace), appears connected with the name of Malik Mansur in fig. 6. Another bit of information can be found in figure 20,



26. An undated religious inscription (probably from the Sultanate period) in the thuluth style. It contains a verse (2: 261) from the Qur'an and a hadith of the Prophet. Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

where the inscription lists the names of all four of the Righteous Caliphs; this is evidence for the Sunni leanings of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb 'Alamgir, whose name is also mentioned in the text.

The inscription in fig. 9 records the building of a mosque/madrassa by Khan Balka Khan (1229–30). Unfortunately the inscription is broken, and the text is therefore incomplete. What exists of it, however, reveals a high standard of Persian literary composition in poetic form. The mosque/madrassa is still quite common in Bengal. Both the epigraphic and other historic sources suggest that madrasas were founded in Bengal from the very beginning of the introduction of Islam into the area, based on the educational system known as *dars-i nu-zāmi* used in the madrasas of Persia that was introduced by the Seljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk in the second half of the eleventh century and later on remodeled by Mulla Nizamuddin during the reign of Aurangzeb. Madrasas played an important role in the Islamization of Bengal and produced many of the Islamic scholars of the region.

Some of the inscriptions record endowments. The inscription in fig. 21 records an endowment of land to two different mosques (one a masjid, the other a jami') by one Haji Bhagal Khan. In rural Bengal, the title *haji*

is sometimes a sign, not just of one who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, but of someone with some status in society. The other appellations of the donor are more humble. He styles himself *banda-i dā'if* (weak servant) as called for by the religious context of the inscription. The hadith quoted is problematic: it does not appear in any other known Islamic inscription or in any of the hadith collections. The text goes, "One who breaks any edifice of Islam becomes an infidel. God effaces thousands and thousands of virtues and enters thousands and thousands of sins against him. God opens for him the door to hellfire. Whomsoever protects this structure will receive his reward in both habitations." The more common phrase that would appear in such a context is "The one who builds a mosque on this earth for Allah's sake, Allah will build a palace for him in the hereafter" (fig. 16).

In the same inscription (fig. 21), there is also a gradual switch to Persian from Arabic. Heretofore religious texts were always written solely in Arabic, but after Humayun's return to Delhi from Iran, Persian began to dominate every aspect of cultural life in India including epigraphy. The crude writing of this inscription also shows a decline in the earlier high standard of monumental calligraphy, a result of the political turmoil in

Bengal at this time. The pillar-like stone slab on which this inscription is carved has inscriptions in Sanskrit written in an archaic Bengali script on its two other sides. This Sanskrit text records the establishment of a "Mahsid Mandira Dini," apparently a reference to the two mosques mentioned in the Arabic-Persian texts in this inscription.

The other two dated inscriptions (figs. 22-23) of Haji Bhagal Khan most likely belong to the mosques mentioned in the previous inscription. In both, Haji Bhagal Khan records the name of the Emperor Akbar, although the inscriptions are dated 1591, a time when Akbar's authority in this region was not yet fully established. Both inscriptions were found in Daodkandi in the present Comilla district, not far from Sonargaon, the seat of 'Isa Khan, an Afghan chieftain who fiercely resisted Mughal expansion into Bengal. By 1591, Haji Bhagal Khan probably had the foresight to realize that Mughal rule in the region was inevitable and that he would be wise to express his allegiance to Akbar in his inscription.

By the end of the century the Mughals had succeeded in establishing a firm administrative hold in Bengal, whether by force of arms or by a conciliatory approach, as with 'Isa Khan who was honored with the title *masnad-i a'la* and was allowed to retain his fief. Lala Rajmal, whose name we find in a much later inscription, dated 1102 (1690; fig. 24), was a treasurer for one of the descendants of 'Isa Khan during the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. This was the age which can truly be called the golden age of Bengal, for it was a time of peace and stability during which its prosperity was reflected in the exquisitely beautiful calligraphy seen in figs. 24 and 25. Lala Rajmal was not a local name; he may have been a Hindu immigrant from northern India. The appointment of a non-Muslim to a post as important as treasurer shows that religious tolerance and harmony prevailed in the country even during the reign of Aurangzeb, who has been accused by some historians of being a religious fanatic. The inscription in figure 24 also indicates that many among the Hindu elite developed a taste for Persian, the official court language, during the Mughal period, sometimes to such an extent that they chose it to perpetuate their memory through commemorative inscriptions. The date of this inscription is recorded in a chronogram in the last line. Chronograms were popular in Bengal in the Mughal period and appear in many epigraphical texts.

The inscriptions of Bengal form a distinctive part of the Islamic cultural heritage of South Asia. Artists of

the region successfully employed a variety of calligraphic styles unmatched elsewhere in the Islamic world in their architectural inscriptions. From the evidence of the inscriptions that are signed and indicate the calligraphers' place of origin, it can be concluded that, in addition to local craftsmen, the inscriptions represent the work of calligraphers from Central Asia and Iran. This diversity of origin was another reason why the styles used were so varied. This rich epigraphical legacy both opens up a new chapter in the study of architectural calligraphy in Islamic culture and offers a mine of historical information pertaining to this part of the Islamic world.

*Binodpur Bazar, Rajshahi
Bangladesh*

APPENDIX: SOME EXAMPLES OF EPIGRAPHICAL TEXTS FROM MUSLIM BENGAL

1. Text (fig. 7):

- L-1 [بندی [هـ] ذی قعد السجدة فی عهد السلطان الأعظم المؤمن بالله ناصر عباد الله غیاث الدین ابو الفکر محمد] [شاه]
L-2 بن حسین شاه السلطان خلد الله تعالی ملکه وسلطانه باقی خبر اول ملک ابن روشن ملک فی شهور سنة اربع وثلثین وتسع [هـ] یة

Translation: This mosque was built in the reign of the sultan, the great, the just custodian of God's lands, the helper of God's servants, the savior of the world and religion, Abu al-Mazaffar Mahmud Shah, son of Husain Shah the sultan, may God the exalted perpetuate his kingdom and sovereignty. The first builder of [this] beneficent [edifice] Malik, son of Roshan Malik, in the months of the year 934 [1528].

2. Text (fig. 8):

- L-1 اول ثنا وحمد بگویم خدا برا
کار است بخت خود این سرا برا
هر دم بکی در آید [د] بگر برون رود
کس را حال نیست که این جاسکون شود
L-2 انکس که باشد آنگه از بن چرخ نشسته
دانند که زاد راه نباشد دگر چرخبر
سلطان علاء دین ودینا شه جهان
که ز عدل او رنگش نگشته بره نهان
L-3 اسلام را فرازی هر دم ز جهد او
از فضل حق غام شد این بل بعد او
این خبر را معجزا نست کومدام
شب روز خبر کرده در حق خاص عام

Translation: In the beginning, I praise and thank God, the One who in His [divine] wisdom has set this inn. At every moment someone is entering into it, while someone else is departing. For no one has the capacity to stay here. As soon as someone becomes aware of the speedy passing of time, he soon realizes that the only provision [for this journey] is the good deed. Because of the justice of Sultan 'Ala' al-din wa al-dunya Shah Jahan, even the wolf would not approach the lamb. Because of his efforts, Islam grows every moment. By the mercy of [God] the just this bridge is completed during his reign. May the good deeds of his benevolence perpetuate the one who both day and night looks after the welfare both of the chosen and the common.

3. Text (fig. 9):

- L-1 [سلامت باد شاه أهل ایمان]
سپاس خاں بکا خان سراپ
که از اخلاص پرکت کرد بنیان
L-2 [که هست اوقات لطفت واحسان]
بگاه حل مشکلفای علمی
ز طبع پاک باشد موشگافان
L-3 [سلامت] [مسجد از الطاف پنهان]
بود نا در جهان نام مساجد
بقا ذات خان پارلیهان

Translation: In the reign of the emperor, the possessor of faith, I recite [verses of] thanks for Khan Balka Khan, the one who erected this edifice in sincerity in an act of benevolence and kindness, a place where scholarly problems are solved through the purity of its essence, even the smallest questions find an answer [here]. He built this mosque out of his secret generosity. May the [nobler] name of Khan be truly perpetuated so long as the word mosque exists on this earth.

[This is the second earliest Islamic inscription discovered so far in Bengal. It records the name of Khan Balka Khan, the rebel Khily chieftain who ruled Bengal between 626 and 628 (1229-30).]

4. Text (fig. 10):

- (A) L-1 بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله
(B) هذا مال الملك الكبير الكريم المريد المظفر المنصور المجاهد المراتب العازي
(C) مصرف الدولة والدين اسد الاسلام المسلمين ابو الملوك والسلاطين المعروف
بابا راجح السلطان ادام الله اقباله في عهد نوبت السلطان الاعظم غياث
الدين والدين ابو المظفر بهادر شاه السلطان [بن] السلطان محمد الله فرائين (A) L-2
ملكته وهما براهين
(B) سلطنته شهرت نتي عشرين وسبعين ناه، صاحبنا لوجه الله تعالى نفل
الله منه يحط العبد الضعيف محمد بن محمد بن احمد غفر الله اجمعين

Translation: In the name of God, the most merciful and compassionate. There is no god but God alone, and Muhammad is His messenger. This is the treasury of the king, the great, the benevolent, the supporter one, the victorious, the aided one, the holy warrior, the advance guard, the conqueror, the supporter of the state and the faith, the lion of Islam and the Muslims, the father of kings and sultans,

known for his great sacrifice for the imperial [sovereign]. May God perpetuate his prosperity. At the time of the Sultan's succession, the great, the succor of the world and the faith, the victorious Bahadur Shah, the sultan [son of the] sultan, may God preserve the laws of his kingdom and establish the legitimacy of his kingdom. In the months of the year 722 [1322], a rightful construction for the sake of God the exalted. May God accept [it] from him. [Inscribed] by the hand of the humble servant Muhammad ibn Ahmad, may God forgive all.

5. Text (fig. 13):

- L-1 قال الله تعالى واقبلوا الصلوة طرف النهار وزلفا من الليل ان الحسنات يذهبن
السبات ذلك ذكرى للذاكرين واصبر ان الله لا يضيع اجر المحسنين.
L-2 قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم خير البقاع مساجدها شر البقاع اسواقها وقال عم
من اتقى درهما على طالب العلم فكأنما اتقى جيلا من ذهب الاخرى في سبيل الله
تعالى
L-3 بنى هذه المسجد وقت في زمان أمير جلال الدنيا والدين ابو المظفر محمد شاه
سلطان خلد ملكه والباقي لهذه الخيرة ملك صدر الملة والدين سلطان امير دهر،
سورية خاص طاق عمره وابنده بها يوم الأحد الخامس من جمادى الاول سنة
خمس وثلاثين وثمانمائة.

Translation: God the exalted said: "And establish prayers at both ends of the day and at the approaches of the night. Indeed those deeds that are good replace those that are bad. This is advice to those who are mindful. And be patient, for God will never let the good rewards of righteous people go to waste." The Prophet, the peace and blessing of God be upon him, said: "The best places [on earth] are its mosques and the worst places are its market places." He [lit. 'ayn-min, an abbreviation for *Alayn al-Salawāt wa al-Salām*] also said, "Whoever spends a dirham on a student, it will be as if he had spent a mawmūn of red [i.e., pure] gold in the path of God the Great." The mosque was built and completed in the time of the amir, the august of the world and the faith, the victorious Muhammad Shah Sultan; may God perpetuate his kingdom. And the builder of this beneficent work is Malik, heart of the nation and the religion, a royal servant, special amir of *dahā' sūtiyya*, may his life be long. He began it on Sunday, the fifth day of Jinnad al-Awwal in the year 835 [January 12, 1432].

6. Text (fig. 14):

- L-1 قال الله تعالى وإن المساجد لله فلا تدعوا مع الله أحدا حامدا وشاكرا لله
ذی الحجة النادرة على نعمة العظام وكلفنا بالشرع والاحكام مصليا ومسلما
نحمد ذی
L-2 الشفاعة عليه السلام بنی المسجد باسم السلطان الاعظم المظفر خليفة الله
على الكونين جلال
L-3 الدنيا والدين ابو المظفر محمد شاه السلطان خلد ملكه وسلطان العز خان محظوم
دينار خان سلمه الله في الدارين. شدار معاملة نبك محمد (ع) ونقل في عشر
جمادى الاول من سنة ثلثين وثمانمائة

Translation: God, the exalted, has said, "And verily the mosques belong to God; so do not call anyone with God." Praises and thanks to God, the One who is with shining proof over the splendid gifts and has

bestowed upon us the shari^{ca} and the laws while blessing and wishing peace for Muhammad, the intercessor, peace be on him. The mosque was built in the name of the sultan, the greatest of all the greats, vicegerent of God over all created things, the august of the world and religion, the victorious Muhammad Sihah the sultan; may God perpetuate his kingdom and sovereignty. [Built by] Ulugh Khan, the exalted, [son of] Dinar Khan; may God grant them peace in both worlds. Surveyor (*shiqdar*) of affairs Nayk Muhammad. And it was copied on the tenth of Jumad al-Awwal of the year 830 [March 8, 1427].

7. Text (fig. 15):

- قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى المسجد (٩) بنى الله تعالى له سبعين قصرًا
 في الجنة السلطان السلاطين (٩) علاؤ الدنيا والدين ابي المظفر حسين
 شاه سلطان خلد الله ملكه وسلطانه
 بنى هذا المسجد خان الأعظم سهيل بن حضرت سبحان مورخا في التاسع من
 شهر مبارك رمضان سنة الثني عشر وتسعمائة [من هجرة النبي] ؟

Translation: The Prophet, the peace and blessings of God be upon him, said, "Whomsoever builds a mosque, God the exalted will build for him seventy palaces in paradise.... [In the reign of] the sultan of sultans, the highness of the world and of religion, the victorious Husain Shah Sultan, may God perpetuate his kingdom and sovereignty. The great khan Suhail, son of Hadrat Rahnahan, built this mosque, on the ninth day of the sacred month of Ramadan in the year 912 from the Prophet's hijra [February 26, 1507].

8. Text (fig. 18):

- قال الله تعالى كل نفس ذائقة الموت وقال الله تعالى [فإذا جاء] اجلهم لا
 يستأخرون ساعة ولا يستقدمون قال الله تعالى كل من عليها فان ويبق وجه ربك
 ذو الجلال والاكرام وانتقل
 محفوفنا العلامة استاذ الائمة برهان الائمة شمس الملة حجة الاسلام والمسلمين
 تافع الفقراء والمساكين مرشد الواصلين والمسترشدين من دار القاء الى دار البقاء
 الثا من والعشرين في ذي الحجة في يوم الاثنين
 وكان ذلك من السنة الثالث والستين ومائة في عهد السلطان السلاطين حامى
 بلاد اهل الاسلام والمسلمين ناصر الدنيا والدين ابر المظفر محمود شاه سلطان
 صانه الله بالامن والامان وبني هذا الروضة خاناً لا عظم لطيفخان سلمه من
 البليات والافات.

Translation: God the exalted said, "Every soul will taste death." God the exalted also said, "When their time comes, neither can they delay an hour nor will they advance it." God the exalted said, "All that is on the earth shall perish, and the only thing that will remain will be the appearance of your Creator, full of majesty and magnanimity." And our lord — the greatest scholar, the teacher of the imams, the demonstrator of the umma, the sun of the nation, the authority for Islam and the Muslims, beneficent to the faqirs and beggars, guide of the communicants and the seekers of the right path — has departed from the house of extinction to the house of sustenance, on the 28th of Dhi-l-Hajja on Monday [October 25] And it took place in the year 863

[1459] in the reign of the Suhān of Sultans, the protector of the lands of Islam and the Muslims, the helper of the world and of religion, the victorious Mahmūd Shah Sultan, may God uphold him with peace and protection. The great khan Lūfī Khan built this mausoleum; may [God] protect him from calamity and mishap.

9. Text (fig. 19):

- الله أكبر
 بديه برزيان اهام بيان جارى گشت
 نشيننگا [ه] شاه هفت کشور
 جهانگیر ابن شاهنشاه اکبر
 ۱۲
 سنة جلوس جهانگیر شاهي سنة ۱۰۲۷

Translation: God the exalted! An expression came without premeditation from heavenly inspiration. The resting place of the emperor of the seven climates, Jahangir, son of the emperor Akbar, [in the] 12th regnal year of the accession of Jahangir, the year 1027 [1618].

10. Text (fig. 20):

[lines missing]

- بنى الله تعالى في الجنة سبعين [قصرًا]
 بعهد خلافت خليفه زمان
 شه اورنگزيب است شاه جهان
 بكرم نبى رحمت العالمى
 از ياله اسلام شد اين روشنى
 ابو بكر صديق صاحب كهر
 حدا وند انصاف عادل عمر
 هم عثمان عفان صاحب حيا
 على سلم الله صاحب سخا
 ۱۸
 في التاريخ سنة ج
 مصنف شيخ خطيب چاند

Translation: [lines missing] God the exalted makes for him seventy palaces in paradise. In the reign of the Caliph of the Age, Shah Aurangzeb, the king of the world. With the kindness of the Prophet, the blessings for both of the worlds, with the manifestation of Islam, this enlightenment occurred. Abu Bakr Siddiq, the companion of the jewel, the lord of justice, Umar the just. And also Uthman [son of] Affan, the modest and bashful. Ali, may God bless him, the munificent. On this day in the 18th regnal year. The writer is Shaikh Khatib Chand.

11. Text (fig. 21):

L-1	با فتاح
L-2	قال الله تعالى
L-3	من جاء بالحسنة فله عشر أمثالها
L-4	[و] من جاء بالسبيته فلا يجزي إلا مثلها [مثلها]

L-5	قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من كثر عارة الإسلام فقد
L-6	كفر بحى الله عنه ألف ألف حسنة [حسنة] وكتب الله عنه
L-7	ألف ألف سيئة [سيئة] وفتح الله له باب النار من حفظ
L-8	هذا البيان وجد ثوابا في الدارين ابن وصف
L-9	دوقول نبى على دارين نواب محسن الدين فقير سايه مختصر کرده
L-10	الحب ازراه الله ابن نگاشته شد محمد حماد
L-11	بناشد در مدد امام ومعاش فقير كس كه خواهد شد
L-12	خدا يا رحم كن نو هر دو جهان بنده ضعيف حاجى بها گلخان

L-9	این فقیر در معاش دو مسجد هزار
L-10	بیگه برای لله در راه خدای تعالی
L-11	داد پانصد بیگه خمس اوقات
L-12	پانصد بیگه جامع هر دو
L-13	باری بهم

Translation: O thr Opener! God the exalted said, "Whomsoever accomplishes a good deed will be rewarded ten times over, and whomsoever does an evil deed will be recompensed according to his evil."

The Prophet, peace and the blessings of God be upon him, said, "One who breaks any edifice of Islam becomes an infidel. God effaces thousands and thousands of his virtues and enters thousands and thousands of sins against him. God opens for him the door to hell fire. Whomsoever protects this structure will receive his reward in both habitations." This statement is from the saying of the Prophet about both dwellings. Nawab Muhsenuddin, the faqir, whose shade was brief. It was for the love of God that Muhammad Hamad inscribed it. It was built to help the imam and to [provide] sustenance to whomsoever wishes to be so, O God be merciful in both worlds. The humble servant Haji Bhagal Khan.

This faqir has endowed for the sake of God and in the path of God the exalted and for the sake of God one thousand *bigha* [1 *bigha* = 1,600 sq. yds] toward the maintenance of two mosques, five hundred *bigha* for the masjid, and five hundred *bigha* for the congregational mosque at the same time.

12. Text (fig. 22):

L-1	لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله
L-2	بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
L-3	نصر من الله وفتح قريب وبشر المؤمنين
L-4	جلا [ل] الدين أكبر بادشاه غازي
L-5	رحم كن نو فردا [رحمة] از تو فر [و] ان [؟]
L-6	لوقات حاجى بها گل خان

بنابریخ ۹۰
ربیع [۱] لاول
سنه ۱۰۰۰

Translation: There is no god but God alone and Muhammad is His messenger. In the name of God, the most compassionate and merciful. Sustenance is from God and victory is nearing, so convey to the believers the happy news.

The augustness of the religion — Akbar [the] emperor, [the] victorious. [Verse:] O God, the wealthy and rich/Be merciful in the coming day. A mosque for the five daily prayers/Among the constructions of Haji Bhagal Khan. Dated 10 Rabi' al-Awwal in the year 1000 [December 26, 1591].

13. Text (fig. 23):

L-1	لا اله الا الله محمد الرسول [رسول] الله نصر من الله وفتح قريب وبشر المؤمنين
L-2	[قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى مسجدا بنى الله له بيتا في الجنة]
L-3 این کرده شد بوقت جلال الدين أكبر باد شاه خلد الله ملكه
L-4	[باینج گدانی] هر دو جهان بنده ضعيف حاجى بها گلخان
L-5	.. شد این مسجد بنای بر طرف مازد اگر مسلمان باشد حرام می خورد
L-6	اگر هندو باشد گاومی خورد و هر کس که این عازرت را نگاه دارد جای بلندش
L-7	۱۰۰۰ سنه سال بلند شد

Translation: There is no god but God alone and Muhammad is His messenger. Sustenance is from God and victory is nearing; so convey to the believers the happy news. The Prophet, the peace and blessings of God be upon him, said, "For whoever builds a mosque God will build for him a house in paradise." It was built in the time of the augustness of religion Akbar, [the] emperor, may God perpetuate his kingdom.

A worthless beggar in both worlds. A humble servant Haji Bhagal Khan. [Whoever] does [any damage] to this mosque will make a place [for him] in hell. If he [the usurper] be Muslim, then it will be as if he takes prohibited food. If he be a Hindu, then it will be as if he eats the flesh of the cow. And anyone who looks after this building, his position will be exalted. In the year 1000 [it] was erected.

14 Text (fig. 24):

- L-1 معدن الأفضال لاله راجمل
 L-2 سانه راته خدا هر نجات
 L-3 دی سرو شم گفت تار بخش بگو
 L-4 پل صراط چشمه آب حیات

Translation: Lala Rajmal, the mine of virtues, who constructed the road for the sake of God for [his own] salvation, last night an angelic vision inspired [me] to tell its chronogram, "The bridge to heaven is a fountain for the water of life [1102]."

NOTES

1. Qur'an 96: 3-5.
2. Al Bakri, *Sum'at al-la'ali*, ed. 'Aziz al-Maymani (Cairo, 1936), p. 578.
3. Fu'ad Afrām al-Bustāni, ed., *Tarajia wa-Lahid* (Beirut, 1961), p. 243.
4. Erica C. Dodd and Sherren Khairullah, *The Image of the Word* (Beirut, 1981), pp. 4 ff.
5. Thomas W. Lentz, "Arab and Iranian Arts of the Book," *Arts of Asia* (Nov.-Dec. 1987): 76-86. With the sudden spread of Islam into a vast area many newly converted Muslims, especially those coming from a strong tradition of religious iconography and symbolism, found it difficult to imagine the basically formless God of the Islamic faith. For them, the written form of Allah in Arabic was a great consolation since it provided an image that could be used for contemplating and meditating about God without coming into conflict with the Islamic faith. This kind of imagination was particularly common in the Bengali mystical folk songs known as Baul songs and the songs of Lalān which are still popular in rural Bengal. Examples of these songs can be found in the collection of Muhammad Mansuruddin in his book (in Bengali) *Ilharomani* (Calcutta, 1942), p. 9; see also Upendro Nath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul wo Baul Gan* (Calcutta, 1958), p. 507.
6. Al-Ghazzālī, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādāt*, quoted in Ettinghausen, "Al-Gazzālī on Beauty," in *Islamic Art and Architecture* (Garland Library of the History of Art 13) (New York, 1979), p. 162.
7. *Counsel for Kings*, trans. F. R. C. Bagley (London, 1964), p. 112.
8. *Rihlat Ibn Battūta*, ed. Abū 'Abd Allāh Muhammad al-Lawātī (Beirut, n.d.), p. 424. A popular saying attributed to Muhammad is that "calligraphy is beauty for kings."
9. Richard Salomon, "Calligraphy in Pre-Islamic India," in *Indian Epigraphy: Its Bearing on the History of Art*, ed. Frederick M. Asher and G. S. Gai (New Delhi, 1985), pp. 3-6; R. Nath, *Calligraphic Art in Mughal Architecture* (Calcutta, 1979), p. 1.

10. Wayne E. Begley, "A Mughal Caravanserai Built and Inscribed by Amanat Khan, Calligrapher of the Taj Mahal," in Asher and Gai, *Indian Epigraphy*, p. 283.
11. Ismail R. al-Faruqi and Lois Iamya³ al-Faruqi, *Cultural Atlas of Islam* (New York, 1986), p. 361. Lois Iamya³ al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art* (Islamabad, 1985), p. 36.
12. Martin Lings, "The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination" (London, 1976), p. 17. In Bengal, for instance, some of the inscriptions of the religious monuments are placed so high on the wall that it is quite often impossible to read them without a ladder. I suspect that they were placed high up so that the common people would be satisfied solely by their abstract beauty and baraka.
13. Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York, 1984), pp. 2 ff.
14. Ali Alparslan, "Khaṭṭ in Persia," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed., p. 1123.
15. 'Alī Rāhīrī, *Tārīkh-i Mukhtaṣar-i Khaṭṭ wa sayr-i Khawshīnīzī dar Irān* (Tehran, 1345 S.), pp. 65 ff.
16. Donald P. Little, "The Haram Documents as Sources for the Arts and Architecture of the Mamluk Period," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 61-72.
17. al-Qalqashandī, *Shuhb al-A'shā fi ḡinā'at al-Inshā'* (Cairo, 1383 A.H.), vol. 3, p. 12.
18. Z. A. Desai, "An Early-Thirteenth-Century Inscription from West Bengal," *Epigraphia Indica, Arabic and Persian Supplement* (1975): 6-12.
19. M. Ziauddin, *Moslem Calligraphy* (Calcutta, 1936), p. 65. As we noted earlier, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the transitional period for Arabic writing; in that period a gradual transition took place from the use of extremely angular styles to more adaptable cursive ones. It was, however, not an abrupt change. During the transitional period we find semi-angular, semi-Kufic styles where elements of both Kufic and naskh can be seen, and these peculiar kinds of writing often resemble the so-called Bihari style of the Subcontinent. One such example of the transitional pattern of writing can be seen in the first page of the manuscript, "*Jāmi' al-Uṣūl fi Ahādīth al-Rasūl*," by Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazārī (Dār al-Kutub al-Zāhiriyyah Library, Damascus, MS 210), which closely resembles the later Bihari style of the Subcontinent.
20. Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, p. 16.
21. Qalqashandī, *Shuhb al-A'shā*, vol. 13, pp. 164-66.
22. Calligraphers in Islamic culture may have been motivated by the visual appearance of the word Allah, where powerful vertical shafts dominate the lettering design. A plain vertical is also used for writing the numerical value of "one," which always remains one even if multiplied by other plain verticals of one, and can be taken as a symbol of the unity of Allah, the pivotal theme of Islamic belief. Thus a calligrapher in Islamic culture may find a kind of spiritual satisfaction and majestic appeal in the verticals of his calligraphic design. A sharp and graceful sword-like alif may also represent the power of Islamic dynamism and spirit as well as justice in the form of sword or *sayf* (see fig. 5, shape A).